

Who Rules Sport Now? White and Brackenridge Revisited

Introduction

Women are becoming increasingly visible in the world of sport. The success of elite female athletes, the consolidation of professional circuits in women's golf and tennis and the rising number of female sports broadcasters have each contributed to a higher profile while commercial sport now attracts female spectators through merchandising, the health and fitness industry and television. However, many reports indicate little change in sports governance. As recently as 2003 a UK Sport strategy document (2003: 5) reiterated the findings of the Brighton Conference ¹ which stated that 'Women are under-represented in the leadership and decision-making of all sport and sport-related organisations' (1994: Principle 6).

Yet the importance of having women in positions of influence has been highlighted for over two decades by organisations such as the Women's Sports Foundation, formed in 1984 to improve and promote opportunities for women and girls in sport at all levels, and by government ministers, most recently Tessa Jowell, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (*Daily Telegraph*, 7 March 2005). Several arguments have been advanced to support this view. The fundamental issue of equality and fairness was raised at the Council of Europe in 1981 and in the Brighton Declaration. The importance of female role models is seen as vital in providing examples to younger women and girls while their continued absence from positions of power only serves to reinforce gender stereotypes. Furthermore, a female perspective in management and decision-making is not only more democratic but allows different skills and experience to be brought to the process of sport (UK Sport, 2003: 5).

Although efforts have been made to promote female involvement, research has always suggested that the power structures of many sports are heavily weighted in favour of men (for example, Hall et al, 1989; Cohen, 1993; Hargreaves, 1994;) and that most educational and amateur sport systems continue to exclude women from positions of power and influence (Birrell & Theberge, 1994: 338). It has been argued that attitudes in some areas have changed relatively little in the past century - the International Olympic Committee appointed its first women members in 1981, 85 years after the inaugural modern Olympic Games - (Shaw and Slack, 2002: 86; IOC, 2004) and reports continue to state that women are grossly under-represented as paid executives, board members and elected chairs at the higher levels of sports management (Ferris, 2000: 31).

Or so we are led to believe. Unfortunately, little research has been undertaken on the numbers of women involved in organisational areas of British sport and even less on specific administrative, managerial and decision-making positions held by women. An article in this journal by White and Brackenridge in 1985, which looked at precise numbers of women in influential roles, has continued to inform academic discourse and although their investigation provided the most comprehensive piece of empirical work on women in British sports governance, it is now 20 years old. A more recent report by the Sports Council (1992) simply echoed the results of White and Brackenridge, and a further paper by White (2003) provided no fresh data to back up a claim that female influence in the boardroom and on the coaching field had actually decreased since the original study.

In 1985 White and Brackenridge examined gender structure in three areas of sports administration and management, and calculated the percentage of women occupying positions of power, taken to mean membership of a committee or council at national level. The results suggested that there had been little change in female representation between 1960 and 1985, a period in which women's participation in sport had been increasing, and that few women were taking up posts in the 'new professional fields' of coaching, management and administration. From this, the authors reasoned that growing 'professionalisation' of sport was likely to result in a decrease in female influence.

Twenty years on, the overall lack of fresh empirical evidence means that few assertions concerning the position of women in British sports governance can now go unchallenged. We need to find out whether women still lack adequate representation, or have even become increasingly marginalised in sports management, as forecast not only by White and Brackenridge but also by researchers in other countries (Bryson, 1987; Hall et al., 1989, Hovden, 2000). The main purpose of this study, therefore, is to take a snapshot of the current situation and to ascertain what changes have taken place in the last two decades. The initial findings are presented in this paper.

Methodology

To arrive at an accurate assessment of the current position, data on personnel was gathered from three areas: national pan-sport organisations; the professional fields of administration, management and coaching; and governing bodies of individual sports. As far as possible similar organisations to those studied by White and Brackenridge were chosen.

The first category – national pan-sport organisations – included the British Olympic Association and the five UK Sports Councils.² Staff lists were obtained to determine the roles and influence of female personnel in these agencies, as it is here that major decisions regarding funding and participation strategies are made. Secondly the representation of women in professional sports coaching, management and administration was calculated, using staff lists from Sports Coach UK, the Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management (ILAM) and the Central Council of Physical Recreation (CCPR). Results were then compared with those of White and Brackenridge which had suggested that the power held by women was effectively diminishing due to their limited involvement in these newly professionalised fields.

The third group comprised a selection of National Governing Bodies (NGBs) chosen to illustrate changes in the appointment of women to influential positions in particular sports. In 1985 White and Brackenridge elected to concentrate exclusively on sports where men and women were governed by one organisation, a criterion which has been followed in this study. Staff and committee lists were obtained from a range of NGBs but six sports were selected for closer examination: hockey and netball, traditionally seen as female activities; swimming and tennis, representing neutral or 'gender-blind' recreations; and football and rugby, fields traditionally dominated by men. Additionally, in order to estimate the influence of women in the development of increasingly commercial football and rugby clubs, a representative sample were asked to provide lists of decision-making personnel.³ For any organisation that failed to respond, data from website staff lists or official documents was used once e-mail or telephone contact had established the accuracy of these sources.

Findings

National Pan-sport Organisations

The major bodies within this section are the British Olympic Association (BOA) and the Sports Councils. In their report White and Brackenridge found that at no stage in the period 1960-1980 did female members of the BOA exceed 6% of the total membership (1985: 98). Today women make up 21% of the organisation, holding the positions of President and Director of the British Olympic Foundation as well as three of twelve Vice-President posts.⁴ This demonstrates that Britain is already in line with the target set by the International Olympic Committee which aims to have at least 20% of decision-making positions in national sports organisations held by women by December 2005. None of the five individual Sports Councils had been established in 1985 when White and Brackenridge completed their study, making a direct comparison impossible. However, they found that in the Sports Council of Great Britain, the former national organisation, there were only two women out of fourteen “top-tier” Headquarters staff between 1972 and 1983 (1985: 103). In 2004 female representation on councils or boards ranges from 21% at Sport England to 50% at UK Sport, a significant increase. UK Sport Council panels, whose function is to advise and make recommendations, were made up of 41% women.

Sports Coaching, Management and Administration

Three organisations were examined in this area. Sports Coach UK was rebranded in 2001, having developed from the British Association of National Coaches (BANC) and, since 1989, the National Coaching Foundation. White and Brackenridge found that in

1976 9% of the members of BANC were women with this figure dropping to 7% in 1983-84, and although the organisation does not record a gendered breakdown of its members it is still strongly dominated by male applicants. At the management level, however, matters are different. The Annual Impact Report for Sports Coach UK from 2002-03 shows a staff list of which 70% are female. Nine out of fourteen (64%) coaching development officer posts are held by women as well as the Executive Directors of both Management Services and Professional Development. The Board is currently comprised of over 30% women while 25% of the Council is female.

The Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management is the professional body for the leisure industry and represents the interests of managers across all sectors and specialisms of leisure. The research conducted by White and Brackenridge found that there were 'relatively few' women in positions of leadership (1985: 104) but current data on staff at the ILAM show that women hold a majority (66%) of positions within the organisation including Managing Director and Head of Events. Female membership of the ILAM has also risen steadily from 4% in 1984 to 22% in 2004.

As the representative of the National Sports Organisations and the umbrella body for sport and recreation at all levels, the Central Council of Physical Recreation is of paramount importance to British sport. Although comparable figures are not available from the 1980s, the current staff list of the CCPR shows that women feature strongly, holding 80% of staff positions including Chief Executive and Head of Services. Women also provide 55% of Board members including that of Deputy Chairman.

National Governing Bodies

Female Sports

There is no single organisation for the governance of British hockey or netball: all the home nations have separate governing bodies. As traditionally 'female' sports, it might be expected that women would find fewer problems obtaining positions of authority and this is borne out by the present findings. In hockey, between 45% and 50% of committees, on average, and over 30% of boards are currently made up of women. Netball is the most widely played 'female' sport in Britain. Whereas traditionally 'male' sports have seen greater involvement of women in recent years, netball has remained a predominantly female area in which women still hold the majority of positions. Although Scottish Netball has equal male/female Board representation, England and Wales have over 80% female Board members and all organisations have a staff which comprises over 84% women.

Neutral Sports

Tennis in Britain is controlled by the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA). In 1985 White and Brackenridge found the LTA to have female representation of only 10% on the Council and 5% on the Committee. By 2004 these figures had more than doubled to 20% of Council and 13% of Committee members while women currently form 50% of LTA staff.⁵ In swimming, White and Brackenridge elected to look solely at the control of the Amateur Swimming Association and found that in 1982 only 8% of officers and 5% of officials were female. From a decision-making perspective, only 12% of committee members were women, a significant contrast to the findings of this study. In 2004 each of the swimming associations of England, Scotland and Wales have staff levels which are over 50% female and women make up 39% of committees and councils in England and 67% in Scotland.

Male Sports

Football and rugby in Britain are each governed by separate organisations in Scotland, England and Wales. In 1985, White and Brackenridge found these two sports to have negligible female participation and did not investigate them further. In the area of governance this position has hardly changed. While female staff members of the national Football Associations number around 40%, representation on the committees of the Scottish, English and Welsh Football Associations is still minimal (4%, 2% and zero respectively) at a time when female supporters and participants is growing.⁶ The same is true of female membership of national rugby boards and committees in both rugby union and rugby league. However the numbers of women in influential positions within commercial football and rugby clubs around the country tell a different story.

The percentage of female employees in the football club sample averages over 50% although most of these are predictably in junior administrative and supporting roles. But while media attention has focused on the appointment of Karren Brady as Managing Director of Birmingham City in 1993 and the role of Delia Smith as a Director at Norwich City, little heed has been paid to other influential posts held by women. A selection of these include Chairperson at Tranmere Rovers, Chief Executive at Colchester United, Club President at Bristol City and an Executive Director at Birmingham City. Within the current Championship (previously Division 1) are two female Directors, a Chief Executive and a Director of Operations. At League 1 clubs (formerly Division 2) women fill posts as Club President, Vice President, Chairperson, Chief Executive, General Manager and two Associate Directors. In Scotland, the Chief Executive at Greenock Morton and the General Manager at Livingston are women. In rugby league, a quintessentially male

sport, Hull currently boasts a female Chairperson, Managing Director and three board members while Wigan has both a female Chief Executive and Chief Administrator.

Discussion

By looking at the positions held by women in British sports administration and management today, it can clearly be seen that considerable change has taken place in the past twenty years and that the negative predictions of decreasing opportunities were largely unfounded. At the national level of sports control, women currently hold some of the most senior positions available including Chair of UK Sport, Chief Executive of the CCPR and Deputy Chief Executive of ILAM. All of the national organisations that were investigated demonstrated respectable levels of female representation with some even having women in the majority, such as Sports Coach UK and the CCPR. All of the Sports Councils had an increased number of female representatives in management and leadership, forming 21-36% of Councils and Boards and around 50% of staff.

At the level of individual sports governing bodies there were mixed findings. Consistent with White and Brackenridge was the discovery that women continue to fill the majority of administrative and secretarial positions within sporting organisations. However, the number of women in positions of influence on committees, councils and boards has risen significantly in the last twenty years. With the exception of football and rugby, the average female representation on the councils and committees of National Governing Bodies lies between 25 and 50%. From the six NGBs examined by White and Brackenridge, the percentage of female council members was, on average, very low. The present findings indicate, perhaps predictably, that women still feature strongly in the governance of the 'female' sports of hockey and netball; that, in the main, women

have a significant representation on the boards and committees of neutral sports, particularly swimming; and that they continue to play little part within football and rugby authorities. Although it is not surprising that women play a small part in the governance of British football, their token presence, itself a direct result of the unprecedented recent growth in the girls' and women's game, suggests that their influence here will continue to be marginal.

One of the most important findings of the present study is an apparent correlation between women in power and the age of the establishment. Where the organisation is under 10 years old, there is a greater likelihood of equal representation of men and women in positions of leadership and influence. By way of illustration, Sports Coach UK, UK Athletics and UK Sport, as they are now, have all been established within the last 10 years and have a minimum of 50% of their staff, councils and committees made up of women. The Central Council of Physical Recreation provides an interesting anomaly. Although it was established in 1935, women form 80% of its staff and 55% of Board members. A possible explanation for this may lie in the fact that the CCPR experienced an overhaul of its personnel in 1995 due to financial improprieties – it has, in effect, re-invented itself as a 'new' organisation. All of this suggests that 'newer' authorities recognise the importance of female input to management structures.

In the area of commercial sport, the cases of Airdrie United and MK Dons football clubs appear to underline this hypothesis. Airdrie United arose from the ashes of Airdrieonians FC – formed in 1878 – which went into liquidation in 2002. The re-constituted club has three female directors out of eight including the company secretary and the fans representative, in itself a welcome innovation. MK Dons is the former Wimbledon FC whose financial plight caused them to relocate to Milton Keynes in 2002. Three out of

six management positions are held by women including the football operations manager. Further examples can also be found of more modern attitudes to female participation. Contact with Norwich City FC revealed that a former Chairman aspired to turn the club from a “cottage industry” to a more dynamic force in British football⁷. As such, the club has spent a season in the English Premier League, and now has an estimated 50% female workforce and a well-known female director in Delia Smith. However, although the presence of women in influential roles within football has increased, they are still a very small minority. There is therefore a tendency towards repeated reference to the same successful individuals as role models, perhaps giving the impression that these are unique and largely unattainable positions. (Williams, 2003: 79) The relative isolation of women in a predominantly male environment may do little to attract more women to careers in the top echelons of football administration.

Another finding from the present study relates to the increasing professionalisation of sports bodies. Despite predictions that this would be detrimental to women obtaining positions of influence in sports governance, it seems that the opposite may be true. The growth of professional sport has meant the introduction of written job specifications and criteria which should enable women to compete on a more level playing field and eliminate the worst excesses of masculine hegemony (Hovden, 2000: 80).⁸ The professionalisation of many sports has also meant the development of new departments and the expansion of existing areas of employment within sports organisations. At Arsenal Football Club, for example, the positions of Head of Education Welfare, Head of Communications, Junior Gunners Manager, and Arsenal Ladies Development Officer, which may not have existed twenty years ago, are all currently held by women, as are posts in the medical service, the press office and in physiotherapy.

Professionalism has also led to the need for formal qualifications in many areas of sports governance. The growing number of sports management, sports science and leisure related courses at British universities, together with the overall increase in female graduates, is likely to result in higher numbers of suitably qualified women entering sports employment. (UCAS, 2003; HESA, 2004)⁹ All of this points to a situation where the professionalisation of sport in Britain may well enable women to achieve positions of influence within organizations. As sport increasingly becomes a business, women are to be found taking up positions as commercial directors and managers, marketing executives and company secretaries. As accountants appear increasingly to define the parameters of club ambitions on the field and commercial considerations override purely sporting decisions, women may find themselves better placed to exert an influence at football grounds the length and breadth of Britain. (Morrow, 2003).

Perhaps it should also be acknowledged that sport is not the only male-dominated area of employment. White and Brackenridge noted in 1985 that gender stratification was apparent throughout the labour market and the Equal Opportunities Commission has consistently found that women are under-represented in the most senior positions of influence in business, the police, the media and the judiciary, with less than 10% in each of these fields (EOC, 2005). Sport, therefore, is not a unique case. The most heartening statistics for women may come from the annual survey by the Chartered Management Institute which showed that the proportion of female managers had risen from under 2% in 1975 to 22% in 2000, and to 31% in 2004.¹⁰ Although this indicates that 7 out of 10 managers are male, there would seem to be acceleration in the pace of change.

Conclusion

In the past twenty years British sport has developed from a situation in which it was 'firmly in the hands of men' (White and Brackenridge, 1985: 105) to one where female involvement is strong and on the increase. Although parity with men in sports management and decision-making is still a distant goal, initial research suggests that unexpected progress has undoubtedly been made since 1985.

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Notes

¹ The first international conference on women and sport was organised by the Sports Council of Great Britain and supported by the International Olympic Committee. It was held at Brighton, England in 1994, brought together policy and decision makers, and produced the Brighton Declaration, a set of principles designed to encourage the involvement of women in sport at all levels.

² The five are UK Sport, Sport England, sportscotland, Sports Council for Wales, and Sports Council for Northern Ireland

³ A sample of 21 clubs was selected from the top three divisions of the English Football League, and 3 from each of the Scottish Premier League, the Zurich Premiership (rugby union) and Super League (rugby league).

⁴ All figures in this section correct in August 2004.

⁵ According to a more recent progress report, 'UK Strategy Framework for Women and Sport', UK Sport, March 2005, women now occupy 50% of positions on boards and executive committees.

⁶ 38% of girls in Scotland regularly participate in football ('Sports Participation in Scotland 2001', sportscotland, 2001: 11); football is currently the top female participation sport in England (British Marketing Research Bureau, 2004).

⁷ E-mail correspondence with Jo Duncan, PA to CEO of Norwich City Football Club. 9th June 2004.

⁸ Even five years ago, Hovden's study of leadership selection in Norwegian sporting organisations found that there was an innate tendency for men in senior positions to seek similar attributes to their own in potential candidates.

⁹ There are currently 1190 degrees in sports science and 439 in sports studies available at UK universities ('Participating and Performing: Sport in Higher Education in the UK', UCAS). In 2002/03 56% of first degree graduates and 48% of science graduates were women. There has been a 42% rise in women students since 1994 (Higher Education Statistics Agency, January 2004).

¹⁰ Report in *The Guardian*, September 15, 2004.

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